

Moral Identity and Adolescent Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors: Interactions with Moral Disengagement and Self-regulation

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Abstract Moral identity has been positively linked to prosocial behaviors and negatively linked to antisocial behaviors; but, the processes by which it is linked to such outcomes are unclear. The purpose of the present study was to examine moral identity not only as a predictor, but also as a moderator of relationships between other predictors (moral disengagement and self-regulation) and youth outcomes (prosocial and antisocial behaviors). The sample consisted of 384 adolescents (42 % female), ages 15–18 recruited from across the US using an online survey panel. Latent variables were created for moral identity, moral disengagement, and self-regulation. Structural equation models assessed these latent variables, and interactions of moral identity with moral disengagement and self-regulation, as predictors of prosocial (charity and civic engagement) and antisocial (aggression and rule breaking) behaviors. None of the interactions were significant predicting prosocial behaviors. For antisocial behaviors, the interaction between moral identity and moral disengagement predicted aggression, while the interaction between moral identity and self-regulation was significant in predicting aggression and rule breaking. Specifically, at higher levels of moral identity, the positive link between moral disengagement and aggression was weaker, and the negative link between self-regulation and both antisocial behaviors was weaker. Thus, moral identity may buffer against the maladaptive effects of high moral disengagement and low self-regulation.

Keywords Moral identity · Moral disengagement · Self-regulation · Self-control · Moral motivation · Interactions · Prosocial · Antisocial

Introduction

Social scientists have long been interested in prosocial and antisocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors are helpful to relationships, communities, and society, while antisocial behaviors are harmful. A number of individual and contextual predictors of prosocial and antisocial behaviors have been identified, and one individual-level predictor of increasing interest is *moral identity* (Hardy and Carlo 2011). Evidence is mounting that moral identity may motivate people to engage in prosocial behaviors and abstain from antisocial behaviors, but the nature of links between moral identity and such behaviors remains unclear. Perhaps moral identity not only directly predicts behaviors, but also moderates links between other social cognitions (e.g., moral disengagement and self-regulation) and behavior. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to assess moral identity as a moderator of relationships between predictors (moral disengagement and self-regulation) and outcomes (prosocial and antisocial behaviors) among adolescents.

Moral Identity

In general, moral identity is the degree to which being a moral person is important to an individuals' identity. However, there are a number of possible ways of operationalizing this construct. While some researchers use sophisticated qualitative methods for capturing moral identity (e.g., Frimer and Walker 2009), most use

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self-report questionnaire measures that more efficiently assess moral identity in large samples. However, there are a number of self-report formats in use that may capture moral identity from different angles. We will review several of the more common ways of measuring moral identity using self-report scales, and then use these various approaches to assess moral identity in the present study.

First, the most widely used moral identity scale was developed by Aquino and Reed (2002), and contains two subscales: moral identity internalization and moral identity symbolization. Aquino and Reed define moral identity as the extent to which being a person with moral traits is a social identity that is salient to one's self-concept, with internalization being the centrality of the moral person social identity to self-concept, and symbolization being the degree to which the moral person social identity is expressed in action. As such, participants are presented a small set of moral traits and asked to imagine a person with those traits while rating a number of statements about the importance of those traits to themselves. However, most evidence shows that symbolization is more about self-presentation concerns than moral concerns, and thus it was not used in the present study. According to the notion of moral identity internalization, the more important people see the moral person social identity as being to their self-concept, the more motivated they are to be a moral person, and the more cognitively accessible moral-person concepts are for processing information in social situations. As such, studies have shown that adults higher on moral identity internalization have higher levels of sympathy and moral reasoning (Aquino and Reed 2002), are more likely to volunteer in the community and donate food (Aquino and Reed 2002), have heightened moral elevation (i.e., positive reactions to witnessing "uncommon acts of moral goodness," such as positive emotions, positive views of humanity, and desire to be a better person; Aquino et al. 2011), have greater moral concerns for out-group members (Reed and Aquino 2003), are more likely to make prosocial business decisions (Aquino et al. 2009) and less likely to make dishonest business decisions (Aquino et al. 2009), and more likely to have greater self-esteem and meaning, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and lower rates of hazardous alcohol use and sexual risk-taking (Hardy et al. 2013). Similarly, adolescents higher on moral identity internalization have greater moral concern for out-group members and less social dominance attitudes (i.e., attitudes of being superior to others; Hardy et al. 2010).

Second, another scale for assessing moral identity was developed by Gibbs and colleagues (Barriga et al. 2001) and adapted by others (e.g., Hardy 2006). This measure taps "moral self-relevance," which is the importance people place on seeing themselves as someone with moral traits. Moral self-relevance motivates moral action because people are inherently driven to live consistent with their self-concept

(Blasi 1993). Participants rate a small set of moral traits, one at a time, in terms of how important it is for them to be a person with that trait. College students higher on moral self-relevance engage in more prosocial behaviors (Hardy 2006). Similarly, adolescents with higher moral self-relevance have lower self-serving cognitive distortions (e.g., misattributions of hostile intent; Barriga et al. 2001), lower levels of antisocial behavior (Barriga et al. 2001), more internal motivations to be moral (Krettenauer 2011), and heightened feelings of moral responsibility (Krettenauer 2011).

Third, a new approach to capturing moral identity taps the extent to which moral traits are a part of a person's ideal self (Hardy et al. 2014). Based on the possible selves literature (Oyserman and James 2011), participants are asked to think about the type of person they ideally want to be, and then rate a set of moral traits in terms of how much each trait describes that person (i.e., their ideal self). Moral ideal self motivates moral action because the ideal self serves as a goal people strive to approach. Indeed, studies have shown that adolescents with a stronger moral ideal self show more empathy, engage in more altruism and environmentalism, evidence more moral personality traits, have fewer symptoms of internalization and externalizing, and are less aggressive (Hardy et al. 2012, 2014).

In addition to these scales specifically designed to assess moral identity, there are other measures that can be leveraged for capturing moral identity. For instance, Crocker and colleagues (Crocker et al. 2003) developed a scale for assessing the extent to which self-worth is contingent on various factors. One such factor is a person's moral virtue. People want to maintain a positive sense of self-worth, and are thus motivated to live consistent with their contingencies of self-worth (Crocker et al. 2003). College students for whom moral virtue is a stronger contingency for their self-worth are more agreeable and conscientious, more likely to spend time volunteering and engaging in spiritual activities, and less likely to spend time grooming and partying (Crocker et al. 2003). Similarly, they engage in less alcohol use (Lewis et al. 2007).

Lastly, Cheek and colleagues (Cheek et al. 1985) developed a measure for assessing the relative importance of various aspects of identity to a person's overall sense of identity. One subscale captures aspects of identity associated with personal identity, and includes an item regarding the importance of personal values and moral standards. Again, people want to live consistent with their sense of identity (Blasi 1993), so the more important various identity aspects are to a person's overall sense of identity, the more motivation they have in that domain. To our knowledge, no studies have specifically focused on the importance of personal values and moral standards as an aspect of identity. However, the more people see personal identity issues (a broader category of aspects of identity

that includes values and standards) as important to their identity, the greater integrity they show (Schlenker 2008).

Moral Identity as a Moderator

In addition to moral identity motivating behavior, it might also moderate links between other social cognitive factors and behaviors. In other words, it may have a direct effect as well as a synergistic interaction effect with other social cognitions. Two such social cognitions examined in the literature are moral disengagement and self-regulation.

Moral disengagement entails strategies people consciously or unconsciously use that enable them to engage in immoral actions while retaining their view of themselves as moral people (Bandura et al. 2001). In other words, people execute various mechanisms (e.g., moral justification and advantageous comparison) in order to reconstruct the meaning of their conduct in a way that justifies their support for or perpetration of immoral acts while maintaining a positive self-image. Indeed, youth more likely to morally disengage are also more likely to participate in antisocial behaviors (Hyde et al. 2010), including aggression (Gini et al. 2014), bullying (Thornberg and Jungert 2013), and alcohol use (Newton et al. 2014). Further, teens higher on moral disengagement are less likely to help others if it is not in their own personal interest to do so (Paciello et al. 2013). Thus, moral disengagement is not conducive to positive psychosocial development and functioning.

Bandura and colleagues argue that the processes of moral disengagement largely result from situational pressures rather than personality. This emphasis on the power of the situation resonates with well-known social psychological research on obedience and authority by Stanley Milgram, Phillip Zimbardo, and others, suggesting that bad things happen due to bad situations, not bad people (Zimbardo 2007). Nevertheless, there is evidence that personality factors can mitigate such situational pressures (Burger 2009). In other words, even if situational pressures fan the flames of moral disengagement, there are likely contravening personality characteristics that counteractively dampen the flames. For instance, among adults, Aquino et al. (2007) tested whether moral identity would moderate the degree to which moral disengagement predicted aggression toward those responsible for 9/11 attacks. They reported that moral identity weakened the negative link between moral disengagement and aggression. Similarly, in another study of adults, attachment security weakened the positive association between moral disengagement and stealing behaviors (Chugh et al. 2014). Therefore, moral identity (a personality characteristic) may moderate links between moral disengagement and behaviors such that moral disengagement has less maladaptive effects for people higher on moral identity.

Whereas moral disengagement is a maladaptive social cognition, self-regulation is an adaptive social cognition. Self-regulation is defined as the psychological capacity to refrain from or override short-term, selfish motives and impulsive actions, and enact behaviors that are consistent with one's long-term goals (Tangney et al. 2004). Additionally, self-regulation is a multi-faceted construct, consisting of the ability to inhibit undesired responses and activate desired responses (Capaldi and Rothbart 1992). Indeed, youth with greater self-regulatory capacity engage in more prosocial behaviors (Carlo et al. 2012), fewer externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression and delinquency; Doan et al. 2012) and less risky drinking and sex (Quinn and Fromme 2010). Thus, self-regulation is an important part of adaptive psychosocial functioning.

With so much riding on self-regulation, people with low self-regulation, either consistently or situationally, are at risk for poor outcomes. However, just as moral identity can moderate the negative effects of moral disengagement, it might also buffer against self-regulatory deficits or boost the effects of adequate self-regulation. To our knowledge, only one study has specifically examined interactions between self-regulation and moral identity in predicting actions (Gino et al. 2011). Gino and colleagues theorized that people with stronger identity commitments to morality would need to expend less cognitive resources to regulate their ethical behavior. They examined the effects of self-regulation on unethical behavior among adults and found that when self-regulatory resources are depleted by prior exertion of self-control, unethical behavior increases. More importantly, high levels of moral identity weakened the link between self-control depletion and unethical behavior. In other words, people with a strong sense of moral identity saw less negative sequella from a temporary deficit in self-regulation; they depended less on self-regulation to act morally.

Moral Identity During Adolescence

Although studies have examined adolescent outcomes of moral identity (Hardy and Carlo 2011), no studies to our knowledge have been conducted on adolescents to assess the role of moral identity as a moderator between social cognitions and behaviors. But, the lack of adolescent studies in this area does not in and of itself warrant its study. Rather, there are other more empirical and substantive reasons to want to unpack the roles of moral identity during adolescence. First, the teen years see heightened rates of prosocial and antisocial behaviors (Veenstra 2006). Thus, high moral disengagement and low self-regulation during adolescence can exacerbate rates of antisocial behavior and squelch potential prosociality. Moral identity may, therefore, help teens to be the best that they can be, by minimizing the negative sequella of moral disengagement and self-regulatory deficits. Second, although

the seeds of moral identity may be planted early in childhood, moral identity per se does not emerge until adolescents and young adulthood (Hardy and Carlo 2011). It is suspected that this timing is due to the maturation of morality and identity in becoming more ideologically-based during adolescence, thus people begin to define themselves with their moral ideals and commitments. So, this potentially important capacity (i.e., moral identity) to mitigate problems with moral disengagement and self-regulation becomes more available during adolescence, just when it is needed most.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether moral identity would moderate associations between social cognitive predictors and youth outcomes, in addition to being a predictor of such outcomes. For behavioral outcomes, we examined two prosocial behaviors (charity and civic engagement) and two antisocial behaviors (aggression and rule-breaking), to provide multiple indexes of positive and negative behaviors. This was because the processes may be different for prosocial and antisocial behaviors. As reviewed above, moral identity, moral disengagement, and self-regulation have all been linked to various prosocial and antisocial behaviors in prior research.

We assessed three hypotheses. First, moral identity and self-regulation will positively predict the prosocial youth outcomes and negatively predict the antisocial youth outcomes, while the associations with the outcomes will be the inverse for moral disengagement. This is to validate and extend prior work on the main effects of moral identity, self-regulation, and moral disengagement on behaviors in adolescents and adults. Second, moral identity will moderate relationships between moral disengagement and the youth outcomes. Specifically, we anticipate that individuals higher on moral identity will see weaker links between moral disengagement and the outcomes because moral identity can potentially mitigate the influence of social pressures that ignite moral disengagement. Third, moral identity will moderate associations between self-regulation and the youth outcomes. Specifically, teens higher on moral identity will see weaker links between self-regulation and the outcomes, presumably because they are less dependent on self-regulatory capacities to activate prosocial actions and inhibit antisocial actions.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of adolescents from across the US recruited online through Survey Sampling International

($N = 384$; ages 15–18 years, $M = 16.28$, $SD = .97$; 58 % Male; 70 % European American, 12 % African American, 10 % Hispanic, and 8 % other; 27 % Protestant, 20 % Catholic, 20 % Non-Denominational Christian, 19 % no affiliation, 8 % agnostic or atheist, 6 % other). The families in our study came from 45 of the states in the US, 53 % had annual household incomes under \$50,000, and 53 % of the teens were living with both of their biological or adoptive parents. Of the parents who provided data ($n = 325$), 54 % were mothers, and 56 % did not have a college degree.

Adults in the US with adolescent children between 15 and 18 years old were invited to participate through an email sent by Survey Sampling International (SSI; www.surveysampling.com). SSI recruits participants from websites, social media, survey panels, and other sources. Parents who were interested were directed to a web page providing information about the study and asking for consent for their adolescent to participate. If parental permission was given, the parent was asked to have their adolescent take his or her portion of the survey in private. Upon completion of the survey, they were asked to have their parent (the initial contact) take the parent portion of the survey (the parents did not have access to the adolescents' responses). Families who reached the end of the survey received compensation roughly in the amount of \$4 per family, but the type of compensation varied depending on the how the participants were recruited by the survey panel and the participants' preferences for mode of compensation (e.g., cash, points, prizes, sweepstakes, or charitable donations in their name). The present study included both adolescent and parent-report measures.

Measures

The three social cognitive variables (moral identity, moral disengagement, and self-regulation) were assessed using adolescent self-report measures. This is because adolescents are likely the best source of information regarding their own social cognitions (Waters et al. 2003). On the other hand, all of the outcome behaviors were assessed using parent-report measures. Using parent reports reduces concerns over common method variance between predictors and outcomes (Lewis et al. 2012).

Moral Identity

Moral identity was assessed using five different measures. For each of the four multi-item scales, the items were averaged to create scale scores. These four scale scores, as well as the fifth measure of moral identity that was a single item, were used as five indicators ($\alpha = .82$) of a latent moral identity construct.

Moral Internalization The first measure was Aquino and Reed's (2002) five-item ($\alpha = .80$) moral identity

internalization scale, which assesses the extent to which being someone with moral traits is central to one's personal identity. For this measure, participants were prompted to envision a person with moral traits (caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind) and asked to statements about those traits (sample item: "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am") on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*).

Moral Self-relevance The second measure included 8 items ($\alpha = .94$) adapted from Gibbs and colleagues' (Barriga et al. 2001) moral self-relevance scale, which captures the importance of various moral traits to self-concept. Each item entailed having participants rate a moral trait in terms of importance to the self on a scale from 1 (*not important to me*) to 5 (*extremely important to me*; sample item: "How important to you is it that you are honest").

Moral Ideal Self The third measure was Hardy and colleagues' (Hardy et al. 2014) 20-item ($\alpha = .97$) Moral Ideal Self Scale, which assesses the extent to which a person's ideal self is moral. Participants rated 20 moral traits (e.g., generous, truthful, follows values, respectful, and good example) in terms of the extent to which those traits described the type of person they want to be (i.e., their ideal self), using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Moral Contingencies of Self-worth The fourth measure included 5 items ($\alpha = .81$) from the Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (Crocker et al. 2003) that pertain to the importance of living virtuously to one's self-esteem (sample item: "My self-esteem depends on whether or not I follow my moral/ethical principles"), rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Moral Aspects of Identity The fifth measure of moral identity was a single item ("My personal values and moral standards") regarding the importance of personal values and moral standards as they relate to one's identity, taken from Cheek, Underwood and Cutler's (1985) Aspects of Identity Scale, and rated from 1 (*not at all important to my sense of who I am*) to 5 (*extremely important to my sense of who I am*).

Moral Disengagement

Moral disengagement was measured using a 32-item measure developed by Bandura and colleagues (Bandura et al. 1996) that assesses eight facets of moral disengagement: moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparisons, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting of consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization. Participants rated

statements (sample item: "Kids cannot be blamed for misbehaving if their friends pressured them to do it") from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Eight composite subscale scores were created by averaging the items for each of the eight facets of moral disengagement, and those composites were used as eight indicators ($\alpha = .95$) of a latent moral disengagement variable.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation was assessed using 10 items ($\alpha = .83$) from the Early Adolescent Temperament Questionnaire—Revised (EATQ-R; Ellis and Rothbart 2001; see also, Capaldi and Rothbart 1992)—five-items from the Activation Control subscale (sample item: "I can stick with my plans and goals") and five items from the Inhibitory Control subscale (sample item: "I have a hard time finishing things on time"; reverse-coded). Adolescents rated the truthfulness of each statement about their ability to override immediate impulses to achieve long-term goals on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*almost always untrue of you*) to 5 (*almost always true of you*). The items were used as indicators of a latent self-regulation variable.

Charity

Involvement in charitable activities was measured using 6 items ($\alpha = .86$) from the Youth Inventory of Involvement scale (Pancer et al. 2007). Parents rated the frequency at which their adolescent had engaged in various charitable activities (sample item: "I visited or helped out people who were sit") in the past year on a scale from 1 (*your adolescent never did this*) to 5 (*your adolescent did this a lot*). The average of these items was used as an observed variable in the analyses.

Civic Engagement

Involvement in civic engagement was measured using 11 items ($\alpha = .90$) from the Youth Inventory of Involvement scale (Pancer et al. 2007). Parents rated the frequency at which their adolescent had engaged in various political or community involvement activities (sample item: "I participated in a political party, club, or organization") in the past year on a scale from 1 (*your adolescent never did this*) to 5 (*your adolescent did this a lot*). The average of these items was used as an observed variable in the analyses.

Aggression

Involvement in aggressive acts was measured using 18 items ($\alpha = .92$) from the Child Behavior Checklist (School-Age version; Achenbach and Rescorla 2001).

Parents rated the extent to which various aggressive behaviors (sample item: “Gets in many fights”) reflect the behaviors of their adolescent on a scale from 1 (*not true*) to 3 (*very true or often true*). The average of these items was used as an observed variable in the analyses.

Rule Breaking

Involvement in rule breaking was measured using 17 items ($\alpha = .86$) from the Child Behavior Checklist (School-Age version; Achenbach and Rescorla 2001). Parents rated the extent to which various rule breaking behaviors (sample item: “Lying or cheating”) reflect the behaviors of their adolescent on a scale from 1 (*not true*) to 3 (*very true or often true*). The average of these items was used as an observed variable in the analyses.

Analysis Plan

The hypotheses were assessed via structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent variables using Mplus (version 7.11) statistical software. Model parameters were estimated using Full Information Maximum Likelihood estimation, which includes in the analyses all cases with data on at least one variable. As indicators of model fit, we used Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA: values below .05 indicate good fit, below .08 indicate moderate fit, and below .10 indicate mediocre fit), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; values above .95 indicate good fit, and values above .90 indicate moderate fit).

First, the measurement model was established by estimating a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model with all study variables. Second, to examine the study hypotheses we estimated a series of full structural models. Initial structural models examined main effects of moral disengagement, self-regulation, and moral identity on the outcomes. These were followed by models including interactions between the predictors (moral disengagement and self-regulation) and the moderator (moral identity). Specifically, the moderation hypotheses were assessed by estimating eight separate interaction models; each predictor interacted with moral identity in predicting each outcome. Interactions between latent variables were estimated using the XWITH command and numerical integration in Mplus (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2010).

Results

Measurement Model

We first estimated a CFA model to establish the measurement model. This model included all of the primary

study variables (latent variables for moral disengagement, self-regulation and moral identity, along with observed variables for charity, civic engagement, aggression, and rule breaking), and all of the covariances among these variables. Given that several study variables were skewed (i.e., the advantageous comparisons moral disengagement subscale, the aggression composite, and the rule breaking composite were all positively skewed above 2.0), this model was estimated using MLR (maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors) which accounts for non-normal variable distributions. Two of the 10 observed indicators of the self-regulation latent variable had factor loadings below .4 and were thus subsequently dropped. The revised model fit the data moderately well, $\chi^2(258) = 639.58$, $p = .0001$, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .06. Standardized factor loadings for the latent variables were

Table 1 Estimated means and standard deviations of observed variables

Observed variables	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Moral identity indicators			
Moral identity internalization	1–7	6.10	.94
Moral self-relevance	1–5	4.09	.76
Moral ideal self	1–7	6.22	.82
Contingencies of self-worth	1–7	5.38	1.04
Aspects of identity	1–5	4.28	.79
Moral disengagement indicators			
Moral justification	1–5	2.34	.87
Euphemistic language	1–5	1.68	.75
Advantageous comparisons	1–5	1.41	.71
Displacement of responsibility	1–5	1.90	.84
Diffusion of responsibility	1–5	1.81	.82
Distorting consequences	1–5	1.60	.72
Attribution of blame	1–5	1.86	.80
Dehumanization	1–5	1.72	.85
Self-regulation indicators			
Inhibitory control—item 1	1–5	3.74	1.11
Inhibitory control—item 2	1–5	3.78	.99
Inhibitory control—item 3	1–5	3.46	1.06
Activation control—item 1	1–5	3.48	1.19
Activation control—item 2	1–5	2.62	1.07
Activation control—item 3	1–5	3.19	1.24
Activation control—item 4	1–5	3.49	1.21
Activation control—item 5	1–5	3.07	1.30
Scale-score (means of items) outcomes			
Charity	1–5	2.41	1.02
Civic engagement	1–5	1.69	.78
Aggression	0–2	.21	.29
Rule breaking	0–2	.16	.22

Estimated means and standard deviations were obtained from the final confirmatory factor analysis model

Table 2 Estimated bivariate correlations between study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Moral identity						
2 Moral disengagement	-.54***					
3 Self-regulation	.53***	-.43***				
4 Charity	.39***	-.17*	.39***			
5 Civic engagement	.27***	-.01	.40***	.68***		
6 Aggression	-.39***	.52***	-.57***	-.21***	-.19**	
7 Rule breaking	-.38***	.52***	-.47***	-.18**	-.12 ⁺	.77***

N = 379; ⁺ *p* < .10; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

all statistically significant and sufficiently large in size (ranging from .40 to .89). Estimated means and standard deviations for all observed variables (observed indicators of the latent variables as well as the four observed outcomes) are presented in Table 1, while estimated bivariate correlations between study variables are reported in Table 2. Moral identity correlated negatively with moral disengagement and positively with self-regulation, while moral disengagement and self-regulation were negatively associated. Moral identity and self-regulation were both positively associated with charity and civic engagement and negatively associated with aggression and rule breaking. The opposite was true for moral disengagement, which associated negatively with charity (but not civic engagement) and positively with the aggression and rule breaking.

As an additional preliminary analysis, we examined the correlations between each of the five moral identity indicators and the other study variables. This was not in preparation for the primary analyses but was merely to provide information regarding the potential relative importance of various indicators of moral identity to moral functioning. We estimated this model as we did the prior CFA, but included the indicators of moral identity as additional observed variables rather than specifying a moral identity latent variable (see Table 3). The patterns of relationships with other study variables were similar across all five moral identity indexes. However, to provide a comparison in Table 3 we also present average correlations of each moral identity index with the other moral identity indexes, with the two social cognitive variables, and with the four outcomes. Moral self-relevance was most strongly correlated with the other moral identity indexes, with the social cognitive variables, and with the outcomes.

Structural Models

Main Effects

A single full structural model was estimated with moral disengagement, self-regulation, and moral identity specified as predictors of the four outcome variables (charity,

civic engagement, aggression and rule breaking), using the MLR estimator, and adding age and gender as covariates. Age was not significantly related to any of the study outcomes, and was thus dropped. Gender was predictive of charity (in that girls were more charitable than boys), so it was retained as a control variable in all subsequent analyses. The model fit was very similar to the CFA reported above, $\chi^2(279) = 666.24, p = .0001, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .06$. Standardized coefficients are in Table 4, so we only present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, and *p*-values in the text. Mplus only returns *p*-values to three decimal places, so in cases where it returned 0.000, we report it as *p* = .0001 in the text. In this main effects regression model, self-regulation (*b* = .35, *SE* = .09, *p* = .0001) and moral identity (*b* = .51, *SE* = .13, *p* = .0001) positively predicted charity. Interestingly, in this model all three variables positively predicted civic engagement (moral disengagement *b* = .32, *SE* = .12, *p* = .01; self-regulation *b* = .39, *SE* = .06, *p* = .0001; moral identity *b* = .25, *SE* = .12, *p* = .04). Given that the bivariate correlation of moral disengagement with civic engagement was not significant, this suggests a suppressor effect. Specifically, in the context of this regression model, the variability in moral disengagement that is not overlapping with variability in self-regulation and moral identity (i.e., the unique variability) is actually positively related to civic engagement. Moral disengagement was a positive predictor of both aggression and rule breaking (*b* = .16, *SE* = .05, *p* = .001; *b* = .13, *SE* = .05, *p* = .004), while self-regulation was a negative predictor (*b* = -.15, *SE* = .03, *p* = .0001; *b* = -.08, *SE* = .02, *p* = .0001). Moral identity did not predict the antisocial outcomes.

Interactions

To test for interactions between the social cognitive predictors (moral disengagement and self-regulation) and moral identity we estimated eight additional structural equation models. Each model included one of the two predictors (moral disengagement or self-regulation), moral

Table 3 Estimated bivariate correlations of the moral identity indicators with other study variables

	Moral identity internalization	Moral self-relevance	Moral ideal self	Contingencies of self-worth	Aspects of identity
1. Moral identity internalization	1	.49***	.44***	.46***	.50***
2. Moral self-relevance	.49***	1	.63***	.50***	.58***
3. Moral ideal self	.44***	.63***	1	.42***	.45***
4. Contingencies of self-worth	.46***	.50***	.42***	1	.49***
5. Aspects of identity	.50***	.58***	.45***	.49***	1
Average of rows 1–5 (moral identity)	.47	.55	.49	.47	.51
6. Moral disengagement	−.47***	−.39***	−.37***	−.40***	−.34***
7. Self-regulation	.32***	.47***	.32***	.34***	.36***
Average of rows 6–7 (social cognitions)	.40	.43	.35	.37	.35
8. Charity	.22***	.34***	.25***	.23***	.30***
9. Civic engagement	.14*	.24***	.12*	.21**	.20***
10. Aggression	−.25***	−.35***	−.26***	−.29***	−.22***
11. Rule breaking	−.24***	−.33***	−.23**	−.30***	−.23***
Average of rows 8–11 (outcomes)	.21	.31	.21	.26	.24

N = 379; + *p* < .10; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

Table 4 Main effects structural model

Predictors	Outcomes			
	Charity	Civic engagement	Aggression	Rule breaking
	β	β	β	β
Moral disengagement	.14 ⁺	.28**	.36***	−.38**
Self-regulation	.29***	.42***	−.43***	−.30***
Moral identity	.30***	.20*	.03	−.02

Gender was included as a control variable

N = 379. + *p* < .10; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

identity, and one of the four outcomes (charity, civic engagement, aggression, and rule breaking). These latent interaction models were estimated using the ML estimation with numeric integration (the MLR estimator is not available with numeric integration in the Mplus software). With numeric integration in Mplus, most fit indexes are not available. Further, the standardized coefficients are not available, so those were calculated manually and are reported in Table 5. In the text we report only the unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, and *p*-values.

First, we will present results from the four models examining the interaction of moral disengagement with moral identity. For the models predicting charity (*b* = .73, *SE* = .13, *p* = .0001) and civic engagement (*b* = .47, *SE* = .12, *p* = .0001), moral identity was a positive predictor, while moral disengagement and the interaction term were not significant predictors. For the model predicting

Table 5 Interaction effects structural models

Predictors	Outcomes			
	Charity	Civic engagement	Aggression	Rule breaking
	β	β	β	β
Moral disengagement	.07	.21	.36***	.34**
Moral identity	.44***	.37***	−.15*	−.16 ⁺
Interaction	−.04	.02	−.18*	−.21
Self-regulation	.26***	.35***	−.53***	−.41***
Moral identity	.26***	.13	−.09	−.13 ⁺
Interaction	.05	.14 ⁺	.27***	.29**

Gender was included as a control variable

N = 379 for moral disengagement models, *N* = 374 for self-regulation models

+ *p* < .10; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

aggression, moral disengagement was a positive predictor (*b* = .16, *SE* = .04, *p* = .0001), moral identity was a negative predictor (*b* = −.07, *SE* = .03, *p* = .034), and the interaction was significant (*b* = −.13, *SE* = .07, *p* = .049). A plot of this interaction (see Fig. 1) shows a stronger positive association between moral disengagement and aggression at lower levels of moral identity. Lastly, only moral disengagement was a significant predictor of rule breaking (*b* = .11, *SE* = .04, *p* = .01).

Next, we will present results from the four models examining the interaction of self-regulation with moral identity. For the model predicting charity, self-regulation (*b* = .32, *SE* = .08, *p* = .0001) and moral identity

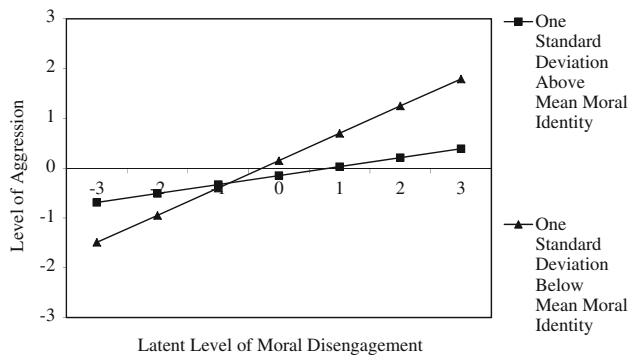


Fig. 1 Plot of the interaction between moral disengagement and moral identity predicting aggression

($b = .46, SE = .13, p = .0001$) were positive predictors, but the interaction was not significant. On the other hand, when predicting civic engagement, self-regulation was a positive predictor ($b = .34, SE = .06, p = .0001$), moral identity was not significantly related, and the interaction was not significant ($b = .23, SE = .12, p = .05; t = 1.961$). Lastly, for both aggression and rule breaking, moral identity was not a significant predictor, but self-regulation was negatively predictive ($b = -.18, SE = .03, p = .001; b = -.11, SE = .02, p = .0001$), and the interaction term ($b = .16, SE = .04, p = .0001; b = .13, SE = .04, p = .001$) was significant. For both antisocial outcomes, the plots of the interactions with (see Figs. 2, 3) show that self-regulation was a weaker negative predictor of the antisocial outcome at high levels of moral identity.

Discussion

Evidence is mounting suggesting that moral identity may be a salient part of moral personality development (Hardy and Carlo 2011). Thus, it is now fairly established that moral identity is predictive of behaviors in adolescents and adults. But, we still know little about the dynamics of how moral identity is linked to behaviors. It is possible that, in addition to motivating moral action, moral identity also acts as a moderator of relationships between other social cognitions and behaviors. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to examine whether and how moral disengagement and self-regulation would interact with moral identity in predicting prosocial (charity and civic engagement) and antisocial (aggression and rule breaking) youth outcomes. Hypotheses regarding the moderating role of moral identity were partially supported. More specifically, there were three significant interactions, all in the expected direction. Moral identity moderated the relationships between moral disengagement and aggression, self-regulation and aggression, and self-regulation and rule

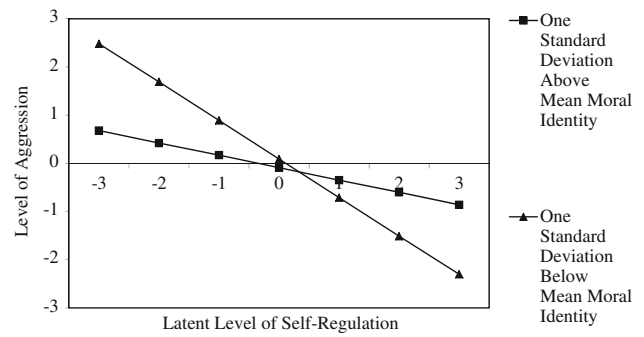


Fig. 2 Plot of the interaction between self-regulation and moral identity predicting aggression

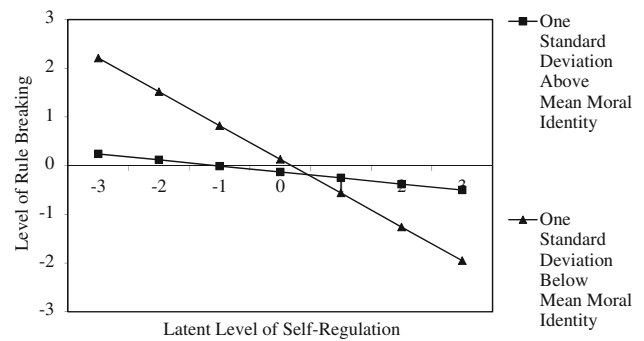


Fig. 3 Plot of the interaction between self-regulation and moral identity predicting rule breaking

breaking. The pattern of the interactions was such that moral identity dampened relationships between these social cognitions (moral disengagement and self-regulation) and the antisocial outcomes (aggression and rule breaking).

In terms of our way of capturing moral identity, this was the first study to demonstrate interrelations between multiple independent indexes of moral identity. In all the structural equation models, we specified a latent moral identity variable with five different moral identity measures as the observed factor indicators. All of the structural equation models fit the data well, the factor loadings of the moral identity indexes on the moral identity latent variable were all large, all five moral identity indexes were strongly intercorrelated, and all five moral identity indexes were significantly associated with all of the other study variables. This yields substantial evidence that the five measures were capturing a common construct. This approach may have more fully captured the breadth of the moral identity construct than isolated measures used in prior studies. Further, the moderately sized correlations between moral identity and the prosocial and antisocial behaviors further validate prior work on moral identity, suggesting that it may be an important component and perhaps a facilitator of positive youth development and healthy teen

psychosocial functioning (for reviews, see Hardy and Carlo 2011; Lapsley 2008).

Beyond these main effects of moral identity on the outcomes, three of the eight interactions tested were significant, and all pertained to antisocial outcomes. As hypothesized, individuals higher on moral identity showed weaker links between the social cognitive predictors (moral disengagement and self-regulation) and the antisocial outcomes (aggression and rule breaking). This is in line with prior studies that have similarly shown moral disengagement (Aquino et al. 2007) and self-regulation (Gino et al. 2011) to interact with moral identity when predicting negative outcomes. Thus, if causal relationships are at work (which cannot be established with the present data), it may be that moral identity in some way buffers the negative social effects of moral disengagement and self-regulation failure. Perhaps moral identity has sufficient motivational and self-regulatory power to make up for maladaptive social cognitions.

Regarding moral disengagement, these interaction results echo those found previously by Aquino and colleagues (Aquino et al. 2007), who made a case for moral identity as a buffer against high moral disengagement. However, these relative roles of moral disengagement and moral identity, with moral identity as the moderator, are counter to discussions of moral disengagement by Bandura et al. (2001). Rather, Bandura, who proposed the construct of moral disengagement, suggested that it is a way for people who want to see themselves as moral to be able to engage in immoral acts and still maintain their sense of moral identity. Thus, to Bandura, moral identity is at the mercy of moral disengagement, and moral disengagement is at the mercy of the situation. In contrast, the empirical findings thus far suggest that moral disengagement is at the mercy of moral identity, in that moral identity can dampen the effects of moral disengagement. Future research might seek to further examine the potential of personality factors to mitigate negative situational pressures.

For interactions between self-regulation and moral identity predicting the antisocial outcomes, the results are in line with those of Gino and colleagues (Gino et al. 2011), who argued that moral identity may buffer against depleted self-regulation. However, these relative roles of self-regulation and moral identity, with moral identity as the moderator, seem counter to Rest's (1983) four components model of morality. Rest pitched self-regulation as a capacity that would enable individuals to follow-through with moral motivations and intentions (i.e., self-regulation is a moderator). In contrast, the present data position moral identity as the moderator of links between self-regulation and outcomes, at least for antisocial outcomes.

It was interesting that the three significant interactions were for predicting the antisocial behaviors (aggression

and rule breaking). In looking at the results for the interaction models, it appears that for predicting prosocial outcomes, the primary role of moral identity was as a predictor (i.e., the main effects for moral identity were significant in three out of the four models predicting prosocial outcomes), whereas for the antisocial outcomes the primary role was as a moderator (i.e., the interaction effects were significant in three out of the four models predicting antisocial outcomes). This aligns with prior work on moral identity, moral disengagement, and self-regulation. Most of the research on outcomes of moral identity has focused on prosocial outcomes (for review, see Hardy and Carlo 2011). On the other hand, most of the research on outcomes of moral disengagement (e.g., Gini et al. 2014) and self-regulation (e.g., Doan et al. 2012) has focused on antisocial outcomes. Thus, moral identity may indeed play multiple roles. First, it may provide motivation to engage in prosocial behaviors. Second, it might also serve as a moderator to help minimize the effects of high moral disengagement and low self-regulation on antisocial behaviors. Future research is needed to further elucidate these roles.

Lastly, as a preliminary analysis, we tested the independent bivariate relationships between each of the five moral identity measures and the other study variables. Relationships between the moral identity indexes and the other study variables were typically moderate in strength (on average), but varied across the moral identity indexes. Specifically, moral self-relevance was most strongly linked to the other moral identity indexes, the social cognitions, and the youth outcomes. Further work is needed empirically comparing the utility of these different moral identity indexes to better evaluate which measures are preferable in which situations.

Despite the important and interesting patterns of findings, the present study had a number of limitations. First, the data were correlational and cross-sectional, limiting our ability to ascertain the causal ordering of relationships among study variables. Although it was presumed that moral disengagement, self-regulation and moral identity precede the four behavior outcomes, the reverse order may also hold; those involved in civic engagement, charitable giving, aggression and rule breaking may develop certain patterns of moral disengagements, self-regulation, and moral identity over time. Future research should employ experimental and longitudinal design to better enable us to infer causal links across study variables. Second, some measures were self-report, which can lead to problems of shared method variance and social desirability bias. However, Clarke, Lewinsohn, Hops and Seeley (1992) report that people tend to be fairly accurate in reporting their own behaviors and internal states. Further, the predictors and moderator were self-reported but the behaviors were parent-reported, limiting the problems of social desirability

bias and shared method variance. Nevertheless, future research should utilize other measurement modalities, such as behavioral or observational approaches.

Conclusion

The impetus for this research was to better understand the role of moral identity in moral personality development and functioning. Prior research has shown moral identity to be correlated with a variety of prosocial and antisocial outcomes. Hence, in this study we examined adolescent moral identity as a moderator of relationships between predictors (moral disengagement and self-regulation) and outcomes (prosocial and antisocial behaviors). In other words, we wanted to examine whether and how moral disengagement and self-regulation would interact with moral identity in predicting youth outcomes. While moral identity was an important predictor of prosocial youth outcomes, for antisocial youth outcomes it acted primarily as a moderator, dampening the negative effects of high moral disengagement and low self-regulation. In short, it seems that moral identity might interact in complex ways with other social-cognitions when predicting outcomes, and that the pattern may differ across prosocial and antisocial outcomes.

The present study has a number of important implications for theory, research, and practice. In terms of theory and research, the present findings urge us to look deeper into the sophisticated role moral identity may play in psychosocial development and functioning. Further work is needed examining mediating and moderating processes at work in predictors and outcomes of moral identity. This calls for more adequate conceptual models and more advanced research methods. In terms of implications in the applied arena, the present results suggest that, in addition to focusing on dysfunctional dynamics of situations that might lead to antisocial behaviors, certain aspects of moral personality (such as moral identity) may also be productive targets of preventions and interventions (Matsuba et al. 2011; Narvaez et al. 2006). All in all, we hope this study helped elucidate the important roles of moral identity in moral personality and positive youth development by providing evidence that moral identity may not only motivate prosocial behavior but may also minimize maladaptive effects of moral disengagement and self-regulation failure.

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Author's contributions SAH collected the data, conceptualized the project, conducted most of the data analysis, wrote the method and

results sections, and edited the entire manuscript; DSB helped conceptualize the project, helped conduct data analysis, wrote the introduction and conclusion, and edited the entire manuscript; JAO helped plan and conduct data analysis, helped present the results in the text and tables, and edited the entire manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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